

Reproductive system health for men and women

Most of us are concerned about our health and we make sure we do what we can to avoid cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and other chronic illnesses. We watch our blood pressure and cholesterol levels, eat a healthy diet and try to stay physically active. But how many of us focus on the health of our reproductive system? Reproductive health is an often overlooked aspect of well-being. Whether it's because of embarrassment, fear, or social stigma, many people (especially men), do not want to know what's going on "down there." But good health involves caring for every system in our body.

Fortunately, media campaigns and increased openness are encouraging men and women of all ages to be more informed about reproductive health, know what symptoms to watch for and seek regular check-ups.

Where women are concerned

There are numerous infections and conditions that can affect a woman's reproductive health. Some of the most serious conditions are:

Cancer. There are five main gynecologic cancers: ovarian, cervical, uterine, vaginal and vulvar. One of the most common is cervical cancer, which is easily treated if detected early, usually through a PAP test. It is usually caused by the sexually transmitted organism HPV (or human papillomavirus).

Endometriosis occurs when tissues resembling the lining of the uterus are found in other places of the abdomen, causing intense pelvic pain and fertility problems.

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Uterine fibroids are the most common noncancerous tumors in women of childbearing age. The cause is unknown. Symptoms include:

- Heavy or painful periods or bleeding between periods.
- Feeling "full" in the lower abdomen.
- Frequent urination.
- Pain during sex.
- Lower back pain.
- Reproductive problems.

Some women will have no symptoms which is why routine examinations are important.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is when the ovaries or adrenal glands produce more male hormones than normal. One result is that cysts (fluid-filled sacs) develop on the ovaries. Women who are obese are more likely to have PCOS. Women with PCOS are at an increased risk of developing diabetes and heart disease.

Symptoms may include:

- Infrequent, irregular or absent periods.
- Difficulty getting pregnant.
- Obesity.
- Acne.
- Hair growth on face, chest or lower abdomen.
- Darkened, thickened skin, sometimes appearing similar to velvet in the armpits.

It's important to see your family physician if you are experiencing any unusual symptoms.

Where men are concerned

Maintaining good reproductive system health is of equal importance to men. Unfortunately, men are less likely to seek help or get regular check-ups, although that seems to be improving in many countries thanks to public health campaigns. Some of the more common reproductive health issues affecting men are:

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Benign prostatic hypertrophy involves enlargement of the prostate gland and generally affects men over 50. In BPH, a man might experience difficulty urinating. BPH can often be relieved through medications or surgery when its symptoms become severe.

Prostate cancer is the second most common cancer in men (behind lung cancer) and approximately one in seven men will be diagnosed at some time in their lives. Fortunately, when detected early, prostate cancer survival rates are better than 98 percent. Thanks to media campaigns encouraging men to get annual checkups and testing, deaths from the disease are decreasing in many countries. Annual screenings are vital because many men have no early symptoms. When they do, they could experience any of the following:

- Difficulty or pain urinating. These symptoms are also often associated with benign prostatic hypertrophy.
- Blood in urine or semen.
- Pain in the hips, pelvis, spine or upper legs.
- Pain or discomfort during ejaculation.

Erectile dysfunction has many causes, including side effects from certain medications, stress and anxiety. Fortunately, once the cause is found, the condition is often easily treated.

Where everybody is concerned

There is one issue that affects men and women equally and can have serious health ramifications: sexually transmitted infections. If the STI is caused by a bacteria (chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis) it can be treated with antibiotics or other medicines. However, if the STI caused by a virus (herpes, HIV), there is no cure, although antiviral medication can help control symptoms.

It's important to note that many people have no symptoms and women may mistake common STI symptoms (abnormal discharge or painful urination) for a bladder or vaginal infection. If you are not in a long-term, committed relationship and are sexually active, be sure to get tested for STIs regularly – and practice safe sex. Condoms are the first defense against STIs.

For more information on reproductive system health issues for both men and women, talk to your family physician or contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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Are you supporting or enabling your adult children?

Once upon a time, not too long ago, the age of 18 marked the entry into adulthood. It was the age when many young people left high school and entered the workforce. They were old enough to serve in the military and in some countries, vote and legally consume alcohol. By their 20s, our parents and grandparents were usually living independently, making their own decisions and mistakes, earning an income, entering committed relationships and having children of their own.

This is no longer the case. In 2014, a U.S. study found that for the first time in more than 130 years, adults aged 18 to 34 were more likely to be living in their parents' home than they were to be living in their own households. This trend continues. More recent research shows that today's 20-somethings have made fewer transitions to adulthood than their parents and grandparents did at the same age.

What's happened? It's not just a different economy with fewer opportunities and more contract work, high student debt or soaring rents and housing prices that's causing this generational shift. It's also not that young people don't move out, they do. They just seem to bounce right back home again. It's because there's been a shift in thinking by parents.

The new normal

It's no longer a stigma for young adults to live at home or have their parents support them. In fact, it can be a sound financial decision to help pay down student debt or save for a home. However, it can also be emotionally and financially damaging if parents are dipping into their retirement savings or grown children are refusing to accept adult responsibilities. Parents walk a fine line between setting their children on the path to success and interfering with their growth by becoming enablers.

How do parents know if they've crossed that line and become enablers? Here are some signs:

- Adult children expecting or demanding things from their parents – financial support, or gifts.
- Constantly bailing adult children out of difficulties or solving their problems.
- Absolving children of consequences.
- Sacrificing financial security or freedom for an adult child.
- Being afraid of “hurting” one's child or losing their love.

Supporting without enabling

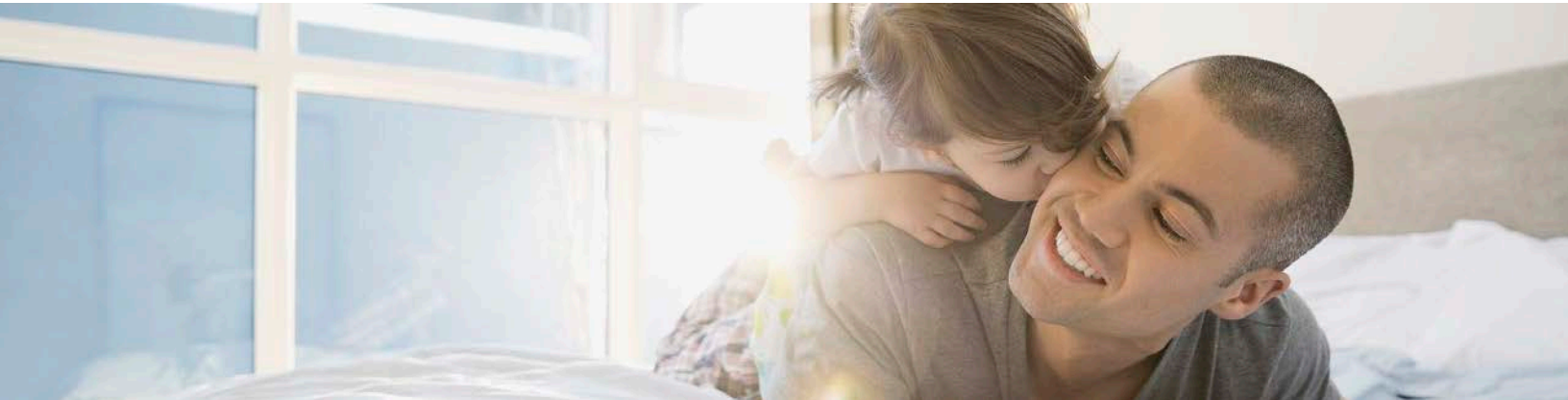
All parents want their children to be happy and successful. Sometimes it makes financial sense for an adult child to temporarily live at home and sometimes crises occur that cause families to come together – a romantic breakup, job loss or health issues. Here are ways you can support your adult children while maintaining balance and encouraging independence:

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- **Set a time limit** on how long adult children can remain at home.
- **Have everyone contribute.** Insist that your adult children pay their way. If employed, they should pay for room and board. If not, they should take over some household responsibilities.
- **Set boundaries and ground rules.** Your adult children should not expect you to do their laundry, clean the house, make meals or do all the shopping. Neither should they feel entitled to have friends over without asking or have access to your car 24/7.
- **Limit your financial support to needs, not wants.** Your adult children want a better car, the latest electronic device or a weekend away with friends, let them pay for it. Encourage them to live within their means and work to finance luxuries. Expect loans to be paid back. Also, give within your means. Don't dip into your retirement savings, remortgage your home or take on an extra job to finance your child's lifestyle. If you are making sacrifices to help your child attend grad school or pay down student debt, let him or her know the impact on you.
- **Don't jump in and solve their problems.** Young adults especially need to develop resiliency and problem-solving skills and they can only do this by learning from their mistakes.

If you or your adult children need financial advice or resources, or require coaching or counseling, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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